



Republicans rip spending on prisons

Lawmakers demand a tighter rein on legal cases.

By E.J. Schultz / Bee Capitol Bureau

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SACRAMENTO — Assembly Republicans on Monday called for state oversight of federal court cases that have dictated billions of dollars in state prison spending.

A court-appointed federal receiver "has literally carte blanche on our budget to write checks for inmates and is not accountable to anybody," said Assembly Republican Leader Mike Villines, R-Clovis, speaking at a GOP news conference before a tour of a Sacramento-area prison.

Villines wants the Democratic-controlled Legislature to convene hearings on the matter.

The Legislature has a duty to oversee expenditures, he said.

Judges overseeing class-action lawsuits have broad authority over major pieces of the state prison system, including inmate medical and mental health care.

Court-ordered fixes already have cost taxpayers more than \$1 billion and are expected to cost nearly \$8 billion in the next five years, according to a report in Sunday's Sacramento Bee.

Don Specter, director of the Prison Law Office — which represents inmates involved in the cases — said Republicans are misguided.

"Instead of just complaining about federal court intrusion, I would like them to come up with a constructive proposal to solve the problems," he said.

Jampacked with more than 172,000 inmates, California's 33 prisons are filled to almost twice their capacity. About one-third of the prisons are in the San Joaquin Valley.

In one of the biggest court cases, federally appointed receiver Robert Sillen has vast powers over the prison health care system. He took control after years of well-documented neglect of inmate medical needs.

Assembly Member Todd Spitzer, R-Orange, one of 25 GOP members taking the tour of Folsom State Prison, accused Democrats of wishing for a federal takeover of the entire system.

"The liberal legislators can accomplish more by having a federal court take over the day-to-day operation of prisons than they can through the legislative process," he said.

Assembly Speaker Fabián Núñez, D-Los Angeles, said he is "disappointed that there is fingerpointing," according to a statement. He added: "We're not about to let the federal government take over our corrections system."

Assembly Republicans — who plan to tour several prisons in upcoming weeks — also blasted Democratic proposals to create an independent panel to overhaul sentencing guidelines. The formation of a sentencing commission recently was endorsed by the Little Hoover Commission, a government watchdog.

In a recent report, the group said the state, by incrementally changing sentencing laws, has created a "haphazard jumble."

But Villines said Democratic sentencing commission proposals are "code for early release."

Instead, Republicans are pushing for more prison construction.

In the short term, Villines said, the GOP supports transferring more inmates out of state.

Gov. Schwarzenegger's administration recently announced a planned round of involuntary transfers, a move criticized by some Democrats.

Republicans, Villines said, also want to find temporary space, such as excess room in state "developmental centers." The centers, including one in Porterville, provide 24-hour care for developmentally disabled residents. Some residents are sent by courts.

Specter, of the Prison Law Office, said converting nonprison space would be tough. "Prisons are like cities," he said. "They have all sorts of requirements."

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